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Why Truth Matters

Ophelia Benson and Jeremy Stangroom



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1 The Antinomies of Truth

It is not new or surprising or puzzling to think that we don't always love the truth. The truth is we often fear and hate it. There can be truths about our own health or that of people we love that we hate with a final ungainsayable loathing. There can be truths about our situation, whether financial or cosmic, that make us uneasy. Keats told us that Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty, and that that is all we know on earth. Romantic poets had many virtues, but rigour of thought was not always one of them. It's hard to think of a less true generalization.

There are true facts about, for instance, how many people were murdered in horrible terrifying degrading circumstances in any one of history's many instances of massacres, war crimes and ethnic cleansings. It is unlikely that anyone knows the true facts, but there are true facts. Melos, Mycalessus, Carthage, Constantinople, Montségur, Armenia, Auschwitz, Lidice, Cambodia, My Lai, Srebrenica, Rwanda – for each placename there is an exact number; for each corpse there is a history. And there is nothing remotely beautiful about any of it. Nothing whatever.

It is no great wonder then that we do not always love and embrace the truth. We suspect that at least part of the truth (in some times and places, nearly the whole of it) is that we are a nasty, short, brutal species with a strong taste for torture and murder, that whenever there is an opening we make serious sustained energetic efforts to eliminate whole branches of our own kind, that even in

peaceful times we persecute and coerce and extort labour from each other, that anything the smallest bit admirable, disinterested, ameliorative about us is only a thin surface element, a bit of gold leaf or paint a millimetre deep, while the greedy murderous savage goes all the way down, to solid bedrock.

This truth or suspected truth is all the more unbeautiful in light of our situation. 'Thrown' into the world, as the existentialists liked to put it, with only each other – more of the brutal murder-prone primates – to call on for help. 'History to the defeated / may say Alas, but cannot help or pardon,' Auden remarked. History cannot, and neither can anything else. Not the *deus absconditus*,¹ not the stars, not the universe, not other animals, not plants or rocks, not numbers or ideas, not goodness or beauty or, even, truth.

This sort of truth may be a number of things – bracing, interesting – but it is not exactly beautiful, and it is certainly not comforting or reassuring. So it could be said that we have good reason to hate and fear the truth; to resist and reject it in order to take refuge in more emollient, cheering, hopeful interpretations. '[F]acts are precisely what there are not, only interpretations,' Nietzsche said: so if one interpretation makes us feel lost in space, we might as well pick another. That is the thought.

Counter-arguments can seem feeble. It's all very well to say that optimistic replacements for the truth encourage us to let our guard down, to be incautious, to install too few safeguards against our sadistic and predatory tendencies; such arguments are not terribly powerful in the face of the desire to feel minimally cheerful about ourselves and each other, and our prospects, and our story.

Thus the upshot is we don't love the truth, not all of it, not all the time. We reserve the right, most of us, to accept some truths but to reject others, no matter how well warranted, how supported by evidence, how tightly argued. 'That's as may be,' we say or think, smiling thinly, 'but there are other ways of viewing the matter.' No one is infallible, no one knows for certain, and I will think what I like. Jamie Whyte is familiar with the reservation:

It's just that, on some topics, many people are not really interested in believing the truth. They might prefer it if their opinion turns out to be true – that would be the icing on the cake – but truth is not too important ... And to register this, to make it clear that truth is neither here nor there, they declare, 'I am entitled to my opinion.' Once you hear these words, you should realize that it is simple rudeness to persist with the matter. You may be interested in whether or not their opinion is true, but take the hint, they aren't.²

That's one way to deal with unwanted truth, and one of the simplest: the mental reservation; the internal denial. A one-step algorithm: just say no. But there are many others: authority, obfuscation, evasion, alternative evidence, taboo, asking unanswerable questions, distortion, shooting the messenger.

The mental reservation method is useful and popular because it is simple and therefore easy: a labour-saving device. It obviates the need to come up with alternatives, suggest other hypotheses, give reasons, offer evidence, think through implications. Another method that shares this labour-saving character is the appeal to Authority: external denial rather than internal.

This method was more viable in the past, in premodern times. It was never completely efficacious even then: there were always cracks, flaws, escape routes, places the authorities weren't monitoring closely, laws or warring barons that rendered central authority less than all-powerful. But for centuries, most literate people were clerics, universities were explicitly theological, and thought-crime could be punished with fire or sword. Magna Carta or no, Queen Elizabeth I had John Stubbs's right hand cut off because he wrote a pamphlet critical of her potential marriage with the Duc d'Alençon, and she was considered mild as monarchs go.

This role of Authority – to tell people what to believe and think, or at least what to appear to believe and think – can be seen in two ways, or from two directions. It was coercive and authoritarian, but it was also in a sense liberating: it liberated people from responsibility and the hard work of thinking. It was external, imposed, top-down,

but that very imposed top-down externality made it a source of inner security and comfort. It's a familiar thought, even to defiant rebellious types (or perhaps especially to them) that it can be very restful just to give up and take orders – the despairing emptied-out rest of Winston at the end of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but rest all the same.

The social world has always lavishly provided this comfort, and still does for many. Holy books, tradition, fiats, laws, priests, judges, monarchs, inquisitions, prisons, chains, axes, fires, manacles, expulsions. The advantage of all these is the clarity, the lack of ambiguity (unless one notices the places where holy books contradict themselves, but people seem not to).

The system was never total. There were always isolated pockets that seemed to ignore it entirely, such as Montaigne (if Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's account of it is accurate), and there were always people who flouted it either openly (thus risking, and often getting, extreme punishment) or in secret. There were hedges and limits, even to strong monarchy, as Charles I discovered. The system became less total over time, as various upstarts came along to throw spanners into the works. The Renaissance, secular scholars, worldly popes, Copernicus, Machiavelli, Luther, Galileo, Montaigne, Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Bayle, Spinoza, revolutions and regicides – all did their bit.

Nevertheless, it may be that the basic idea – that the truth is what the higher authorities say it is, rather than what it is independent of any humans – had its effect on habits of thought over all those years. The notion that certain special humans can decide what truth is entails believing that human decision has some sort of transformative effect on reality, bestowing truth or withholding it; such a belief may foster other kinds of epistemic confusion. Thus for instance it is still a very popular thought that, whatever the truth may be, the important thing is that everyone should be on the same page; that social cohesion and peace are much more important for everyone's wellbeing and smooth functioning than are truth and free enquiry. On this view, truth is a political matter rather than an epistemic one. It is what it is good for the community to believe, not (necessarily)

what corresponds to some state of affairs in the world or some mind-independent object. This system or method is still popular not only because it promotes unity but also perhaps because it frees up a lot of energy. Letting the higher authorities, whether autocrat or majority opinion, do our denying for us saves us large amounts of time and effort, allowing us to get on with other things – earning a living, having fun, improving the world, smelling the flowers. The thought 'Reverend X says that's wrong' or 'Our Leader says that's an Enemy-idea' can be a highly effective bypass or shunting device to deflect our muscle and brain power to work or reproduction.

Another tactic is to cordon off certain sets of ideas, to declare them special, inviolate, taboo, sacred: different from ordinary, mundane sets of ideas, as in Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and profane. Salman Rushdie (who has intimate experience with this distinction) talked about this cordoning off in an article at *Open Democracy*.³

At Cambridge University I was taught a laudable method of argument: you never personalise, but you have absolutely no respect for people's opinions. You are never rude to the person, but you can be savagely rude about what the person thinks. That seems to me a crucial distinction: people must be protected from discrimination by virtue of their race, but you cannot ring-fence their ideas. The moment you say that any idea system is sacred, whether it's a religious belief system or a secular ideology, the moment you declare a set of ideas to be immune from criticism, satire, derision, or contempt, freedom of thought becomes impossible.⁴

This tactic has become a powerful way of shutting people up, because it operates not as external authority and coercion, which can be resented, resisted, laughed at, but as internalized guilt and bad conscience, which are much harder to resist or laugh off. If The Bosses tell us 'you may not think that', there seems to be a certain nobility in defiance and rebellion. It is the Lucifer/Satan move, the Prometheus move – which, as Shelley noticed two centuries ago, can

be much the most appealing and self-respect-creating: 'Milton is of the devil's party without knowing it.' But when the taboo issues not just from The Bosses but also from The Community, especially from The Community speaking (at least apparently) on behalf of the victimized and downtrodden, then resistance becomes altogether more difficult and painful.

This is arguably one of the most powerful and effective tools of denial going at present. Simply invoke the holy name of The Community or Religious Beliefs or Their Culture, and very often disagreement will slam to a halt, in a fog of embarrassment and guilt.

There are at present many such ring-fenced, Taboo no-go areas in disputes over truth; places where disagreeing with people is treated as tantamount to peeing in their soup. Where people see themselves and are seen by others as entirely justified in puffing up like a pouter pigeon and declaring themselves Offended, which being interpreted means, not 'Let us eagerly continue this discussion in an attempt to discover the truth of the matter, without fear or favour', but rather, 'This discussion must immediately cease in order to spare my outraged feelings, and it would be no bad thing if you rescinded what you just said, apologized humbly, and made a large donation to a charity of my choice by way of recompense.'

Religion is the most obvious of these no-go areas. Declarations of offence have become all too familiar. A small group of (male) Sikhs forced the closure of the play *Behzti* by the (female) Sikh playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti in January 2005. The incident was an interesting example of the Special, Taboo, ring-fence, Sacred idea at work, because the objections of a very small minority of Sikhs got respectful attention – more respectful, it seems fair to say, than profane secular non-special groups would have received. The Birmingham Rep met with self-appointed representatives of the offended Sikhs (and did not meet with other, non-offended Sikhs, no doubt because non-offended Sikhs, being unoffended, didn't put themselves forward) to discuss possible alterations to the play. The

Rep declined, in the event, to make all the changes these putative representatives asked for, though it did make some. There were protests, marches, and then a small riot which damaged the theatre, whereupon the Rep ended the run of the play. The playwright received death threats and went into hiding.

There was another – as it were matching – protest a month later, this time by vocal Christians, about the BBC broadcast of *Jerry Springer the Opera*. Again, a small but noisy and indignant group pitched a fit about being 'offended', and when their demands were not met, some protestors made death threats against BBC executives.

It is interesting to note that these forms of Taboo are about art, specifically fiction, not about scientific research, scholarship or enquiry. Being about fiction, they are in a sense not about truth at all. But in another sense they of course are about truth – about larger truths that the artists in question are – or are taken to be – pointing to through their fictions. That is why the protests are made. The protesters do not like the picture that is given of the Prophet, or the behaviour of some Sikhs, or Jesus. And it is the notion of offence, outrage, violation, of Taboo-tampering, that seems to inspire the violence of the protests (all three included death threats). That sense of outrage and violation is one branch of truth-denial.

An interesting aspect of the Taboo device and attitude (and it is both – device and attitude or habit of mind) is that it misses the real difficulty.⁵ There can be a much more cogent objection to truth-claims: not that they offend, but that they do harm. Not the pseudo-harm of causing mental pain, of causing people to think thoughts that they don't like thinking, of causing perturbation and unease, but the real, material, physical harm of, for instance, discriminatory laws and customs and practices, and/or of hatred leading to violence, killing, ethnic cleansing, ethnic rape, war crimes. We will discuss this subject further in later chapters. The distinction between offence and harm is surely crucial, but it gets blurred and overlooked in much public discussion of these subjects.

We have looked at two popular techniques for denying unwanted ideas and truth-claims: what one might call the command approach – Authority says that's wrong – and the Taboo approach. There are others: evasion and concealment, Shoot the Messenger, obfuscation, changing the subject, distortion, asking unanswerable questions and rival evidence.

Evasion and concealment can take various forms, and can be individual and personal as well as public and institutional. One can conceal unwanted ideas from oneself via simple ignorance. One can read nothing, or read only that which one knows in advance will proffer no unwelcome thoughts (and the same applies of course to watching and listening). One can select all one's sources of input carefully such that an alien upsetting suggestion will simply never be heard or read. One can, in short, simply use a very large and very fine-meshed filter.

Shooting the Messenger is generally more difficult in modern times – although not always and everywhere difficult enough. Anaxagoras, the friend of Pericles, was prosecuted for impiety and left Athens as a result. Voltaire characterized the matter this way in the *Philosophical Dictionary*:

Anaxagoras dared to maintain that the sun is not guided by Apollo riding in a quadriga; and he was called an atheist and obliged to flee ... Aristotle was accused by a priest of atheism; and, not succeeding in having his accuser punished, retired to Chalcas. But what is most odious in the history of Greece is the death of Socrates ...⁶

Giordano Bruno was burnt; Galileo was coerced. Books were placed on the papal index. John Wilkes and Leigh Hunt were imprisoned. Stalin and Hitler silenced people in wholesale lots, as did the Red Guards and the Khmer Rouge, Mao and Pol Pot, Pinochet and the Shah. Salman Rushdie was fatwa'd, a translator of his book was murdered, Naguib Mahfouz was stabbed, Theo van Gogh murdered, Ayaan Hirsi Ali threatened; and so on, into the bleak future.

Confusion and obfuscation are arguably the best way to go. Obfuscation is legal, it's easy, there is always an abundant supply and it often does the trick. The more unclear it is exactly what one is arguing, the more trouble one's opponents will have in refuting one's claims. They may well give up and wander off in fatigue and exasperation. It's always worth a try. (We will say more about this in Chapter 7.)

It's also arguable that obfuscation is what postmodernism is all about. Clouds of squid ink in the form of jargon, mathematical equations whose relevance is obscure, peacock displays of name-dropping, misappropriation and misapplication of scientific theories are often seen in postmodernist 'discourse'. Nietzsche, Heidegger, Heisenberg, Einstein, Gödel, Wittgenstein are hauled in and cited as saying things they didn't say – sometimes as saying exactly the opposite of what they said, as Rebecca Goldstein argues in *Incompleteness: The Proof and Paradox of Kurt Gödel*.

Among 'humanist' intellectuals who do invoke Gödel's name, he is often associated with the general assault on objectivity and rationality that gained such popularity in the last century. I'd often find myself pondering which would be the preferable state of affairs regarding Gödel, anonymity or misinterpretation. Which would Gödel have preferred? I'm going to indulge in 'the privileged position of the biographer' to presume I know the answer to the latter question, at least: Gödel, who was so passionately committed to the truth, would have far preferred utter oblivion to the falsifications of his theorems that have given him whatever fame he has in the non-mathematical world.

And what falsifications! He had meant his incompleteness theorems to prove the philosophical position to which he was, heart and soul, committed: mathematical Platonism, which is, in short, the belief that there is a human-independent mathematical reality that grounds our mathematical truths; mathematicians are in the business of discovering, rather than inventing, mathematics. His incompleteness theorems concerned the incompleteness of our man-made formal systems, not of mathematical truth, or our knowledge of it. He believed that mathematical reality and our knowledge of mathematical reality exceed

the formal rules of formal systems. So unlike the view that says there is no truth apart from the truths we create for ourselves, so that the entire concept of truth disintegrates into a plurality of points of view, Gödel believed that truth – most paradigmatically, mathematical truth – subsists independently of any human point of view. If ever there was a man committed to the objectivity of truth, and to objective standards of rationality, it was Gödel. And so the usurpation of his theorems by postmodernists is ironic. Jean Cocteau wrote in 1926 that 'The worst tragedy for a poet is to be admired through being misunderstood.' For a logician, especially one with Gödel's delicate psychology, the tragedy is perhaps even greater.⁷

This tactic doesn't work with people who actually know something of Einstein, Heisenberg and Gödel – but what of it? How many people is that? And it does work with many who don't.

Asking unanswerable questions is an inconclusive but useful tactic. It doesn't permanently or physically silence the messenger in the way that execution, banishment and censorship do, but it may temporarily silence and divert. 'But *why* did all this happen? Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there Mind? Why is there order? Why is there what looks like design even if you refuse to agree that it is design? Why are we here? What is our purpose? What does it all mean?' The fact that no one can answer such questions is taken by the pure of heart and limpid of mind to entail divine explanation. The fact that such explanation simply permits exactly the same questions to be asked all over again seems not to trouble the divinely inclined.

Looking for rival evidence, evidence that will support the opposite conclusions from the ones the searcher dislikes, looks at first blush like a perfectly legitimate move – like not even a move at all, but simply what enquirers and researchers and truth-seekers do: look for evidence. It looks as if we've left the territory of truth-denial and are back in the well-lit world of properly conducted research. But no. The trouble is that an enquirer who starts with a claim she wants to find evidence for is extremely likely to overlook disconfirming evidence.

This seems to be just what happened with Margaret Mead, for instance.

Mead went to graduate school in anthropology at a time when racist, eugenic and anti-immigrant ideas were at the height of their popularity in the USA, as we will see in more detail in Chapter 5. She was a student of Franz Boas, a pioneer of anthropology who spent much of his career struggling to counter such ideas. To cite just one example, his tenure as curator of anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History was roiled by disputes over the best way to display artefacts in the museum's Hall of Northwest Coast Indians, which opened in 1899. The traditional method was in a hierarchy of development, from simple to complex. Boas was strongly opposed to that method: he argued that to understand the meaning of objects, viewers needed to see them as their makers saw them, rather than in a scheme superimposed by outsiders. 'As always with Boas, details concealed a broader argument: in this case, against seeing human culture in evolutionary terms, rising from the "primitive" to a summit on which the inventors of the evolutionary scheme inevitably perched.'⁸ The Northwest Coast Hall was arranged according to Boas's ideas – but Morris Jessup, the president of the museum, grumbled that he couldn't make head or tail of the exhibits, and in 1905 a collection of Peruvian artefacts was arranged in the old hierarchical pattern. Boas resigned, citing 'fundamental differences of opinion.'⁹

Mead was committed to the Boasian approach, and this fact shaped her early career, including her choice of dissertation subject and her approach to the fieldwork involved. Boas was a cultural determinist; his brand of anthropology was dominated by the idea that social conditioning shaped all human thought and behaviour. By the time Mead went to Samoa in 1925, Derek Freeman says in his *Margaret Mead and the Heretic*, she was a firm believer 'that human behaviour could be explained in purely cultural terms'. Cultural anthropology was becoming a thriving discipline but 'at the cost of becoming an ideology that, in an actively unscientific way, sought

totally to exclude biology from the explanation of human behaviour'. Mead described this mission 'as a battle which she and other Boasians had had to fight'. Thus her writings about Samoa and other South Seas cultures 'had the explicit aim of confuting biological explanations of human behaviour and vindicating the doctrines of the Boasian school'.

In retrospect, Freeman points out, it is apparent that this approach – what we called looking for alternative evidence, that is, knowing in advance what one wants to find and then searching it out – 'is fundamentally at variance with the methods and values of science' and that Mead's commitment to supporting Boas's views 'led her to overlook evidence running counter to her beliefs'.¹⁰

A similar approach – similar in that it starts from a desired conclusion, then devises a way to get there, and then proceeds to carry out the plan – is that of seeking a rival explanation. If you don't like the theory that (as far as present knowledge can tell) best fits and explains the evidence, then you set to work and think up another. The names Duhem and Quine are useful to conjure with for this exercise, as is the phrase 'the underdetermination of theory by data'. It is always *possible* to think of alternative explanations for any set of data. The alternative explanations may be awkward, contorted, uneconomical and generally far-fetched; they may flout Ockham's razor and ignore norms of elegance, beauty, plausibility, avoidance of supernatural explanations and gods of the gaps; but if one is not deterred by such considerations, alternative explanations can be generated and made to 'fit'.

And of course many people are not deterred by such considerations: some because they're simply not aware of them, and would be indifferent if they were made aware; others because they are programmatically sceptical about them. Such norms are seen as themselves part of what is in dispute, so that they cannot be used to rule out alternative explanations without question-begging. If the norms of science as well as the explanations, and the kinds of explanation science generates, are precisely what is being 'proble-

matized' and questioned then, the argument goes, they cannot be invoked to rebut such questioning and problematization. Sceptics about science and truth, anti-realists, postmodernists, gender and identity epistemologists and enemies of the Enlightenment project are indeed probing, questioning, criticizing these norms. (And, ironically, as everyone notices, they are doing it by means of rational argument, and they want and expect their arguments to be accepted and taken as true, so the despised problematized norms immediately slide back in by the rear door.)

So, at the price of offering contorted implausible accounts, alternative explanations can be made to fit – sort of – in a Procrustean, glass slipper sense of 'fit'. Clearly to many people the desire and need to come up with a more pleasing, less disconcerting explanation is vastly more important than any lumpishness and roughness in the explanation itself. But to those for whom the truth matters more than a pleasing account, the contortions involved in the fit are almost always a dead giveaway that the explanation in question is not the right one, and it is not merely imperfect or unattractive but rather entirely worthless.

In fact, the contortions are a giveaway not only that the explanation is not the right one but that something is badly wrong with the method of generating the explanation, that things are back to front, that the enquirer has started, not with a desire to produce an explanation, but with a desire to produce a particular explanation, or a particular kind of explanation. The enquirer has started with stipulations. The stipulations may have been so deeply implicit as to be below the level of awareness, but they were nonetheless binding for that. And they were the wrong kinds of stipulations. Not those that dictate, for instance, that the explanation must fit the evidence, must not conceal evidence that does not fit, must not alter the evidence to fit the explanation, and the like, but rather that the explanation must be in harmony with some cherished belief or goal or commitment of the enquirer. The explanation must not entail or imply that there is no God, or that God is superfluous, or that

humans share a common descent with other animals, or that the Bible is not an accurate account of geology or the origin of species or history, or that acquired characteristics cannot be inherited, or that free will is an illusion, or that the mind is what the brain does, or that human nature is strongly shaped by its genetic makeup.

The naturalist Philip Gosse, who was also a member of the Plymouth Brethren (a Christian sect fundamentalist even by nineteenth-century standards) is a fascinating example of this sort of prior-stipulation-generated explanation. His son Edmund's memoir *Father and Son* gives a poignant and shrewd account, which it is worth quoting at length:

So, through my Father's brain, in that year of scientific crisis, 1857, there rushed two kinds of thought, each absorbing, each convincing, yet totally irreconcilable. There is a peculiar agony in the paradox that truth has two forms, each of them indisputable, yet each antagonistic to the other. It was this discovery, that there were two theories of physical life, each of which was true, but the truth of each incompatible with the truth of the other, which shook the spirit of my Father with perturbation. It was not, really, a paradox, it was a fallacy, if he could only have known it, but he allowed the turbid volume of superstition to drown the delicate stream of reason. He took one step in the service of truth, and then he drew back in an agony, and accepted the servitude of error ...

My Father's attitude towards the theory of natural selection was critical in his career, and oddly enough, it exercised an immense influence on my own experience as a child. Let it be admitted at once, mournful as the admission is, that every instinct in his intelligence went out at first to greet the new light. It had hardly done so, when a recollection of the opening chapter of 'Genesis' checked it at the outset. He consulted with Carpenter, a great investigator, but one who was fully as incapable as himself of remodelling his ideas with regard to the old, accepted hypotheses. They both determined, on various grounds, to have nothing to do with the terrible theory, but to hold steadily to the law of the fixity of species. It was exactly at this juncture that we left London, and the slight and occasional but always extremely salutary personal intercourse with men of scientific leaning which my Father had enjoyed at the British Museum and at the

Royal Society came to an end ... My Father, after long reflection, prepared a theory of his own, which, as he fondly hoped, would take the wind out of Lyell's sails, and justify geology to godly readers of 'Genesis'. It was, very briefly, that there had been no gradual modification of the surface of the earth, or slow development of organic forms, but that when the catastrophic act of creation took place, the world presented, instantly, the structural appearance of a planet on which life had long existed.

The theory, coarsely enough, and to my Father's great indignation, was defined by a hasty press as being this – that God hid the fossils in the rocks in order to tempt geologists into infidelity. In truth, it was the logical and inevitable conclusion of accepting, literally, the doctrine of a sudden act of creation; it emphasised the fact that any breach in the circular course of nature could be conceived only on the supposition that the object created bore false witness to past processes, which had never taken place. For instance, Adam would certainly possess hair and teeth and bones in a condition which it must have taken many years to accomplish, yet he was created full-grown yesterday. He would certainly – though Sir Thomas Browne denied it – display an 'omphalos', yet no umbilical cord had ever attached him to a mother.

Never was a book cast upon the waters with greater anticipations of success than was this curious, this obstinate, this fanatical volume. My Father lived in a fever of suspense, waiting for the tremendous issue. This 'Omphalos' of his, he thought, was to bring all the turmoil of scientific speculation to a close, fling geology into the arms of Scripture, and make the lion eat grass with the lamb ... In the course of that dismal winter, as the post began to bring in private letters, few and chilly, and public reviews, many and scornful, my Father looked in vain for the approval of the churches, and in vain for the acquiescence of the scientific societies, and in vain for the gratitude of those 'thousands of thinking persons', which he had rashly assured himself of receiving. As his reconciliation of Scripture statements and geological deductions was welcomed nowhere, as Darwin continued silent, and the youthful Huxley was scornful, and even Charles Kingsley, from whom my Father had expected the most instant appreciation, wrote that he could not 'give up the painful and slow conclusion of five and twenty years' study of geology, and believe that God has written on the rocks one enormous and superfluous lie' – as

all this happened or failed to happen, a gloom, cold and dismal, descended upon our morning teacups.¹¹

This is the crux of the dispute. This is where the two sides always peel apart. What should trump what. Should rational enquiry, sound evidence, norms of accuracy, logical inference trump human needs, desires, fears, hopes? Or should our wishes and beliefs, politics and morality, dreams and visions be allowed to shape our decisions about what constitutes good evidence, what criteria determine whether an explanation is supported by evidence or not, what is admissible and what isn't?

This crux is never finally settled; it's always with us. It's a fork in the path we find ourselves at many times a day, like a recurring landscape in a dream. That's inevitable, because what is important to us is important to us. The truth is important to us, but so are our needs and desires and hopes and fears. Without them we wouldn't even recognize ourselves. Without them, we think, we would merely be something like an adding machine. An adding machine can get at the truth, given the right input, but it doesn't care. We want the truth but we also want to care – wanting the truth is indeed inseparable from caring. We want it, we care about it, it matters, and so do various other things we want and care about, some of which are threatened by the truth. So we're stuck, and keep arriving back at the fork in the path again.

But we have to choose. Even though our choosing doesn't make the crux go away, even though we still have to go on making micro-choices over and over again, still, we have to choose which fork in the path we are going to take. If we don't, we have a tendency not to notice the crux when it does appear. If we've never bothered to decide that truth matters and that it shouldn't be subject to our wishes – that, in short, wishful thinking is bad thinking – then we are likely to be far less aware of the tension. We simply allow ourselves, without much worry or reflection, to assume that the way humans want the world to be is the way the world is,

more or less by definition – and endemic confusion and muddle is the result.

Religion and related modes of thinking such as New Age, Wicca, paganism, the vaguely named 'spirituality', are where this outcome is most obvious. Public discourse features talk of God-shaped holes, of a deep human need for 'faith', of the longing for transcendence, of the despair and cosmic loneliness that results when God is doubted, and the like; and such talk has a tendency to be prescriptive rather than descriptive: to say, or imply, not 'people are happier when they believe in a deity, how sad there seems to be so little reason to think such a belief is true', but rather, 'people are happier when they believe in a deity, therefore it's wicked to say the deity isn't there', without apparently stopping to notice that there may be reasons to prefer true beliefs to false ones.

What reasons? There are many. One is that truth is something of an all-or-nothing proposition. It is intimately related to concepts such as consistency, thoroughness, universal applicability, and the like. If one decides that truth doesn't matter in one area, what is to prevent one from deciding it doesn't matter in any, in all?

It is surely of the nature of truth that it has to be all of a piece. Its norms have to apply here as well as there, if they are to apply at all. That's why relativism about truth is always self-undermining. If we say 'there is no truth, truth is an illusion, a myth, a construct, a mystification', then that statement is not true – so there is truth then. If we say 'your truth is as true as mine' then you can say 'my truth is that your truth is not true', and round we go.

Such reasons are especially cogent as soon as we leave the comfort of our own minds and enter the public realm; as soon as we start influencing each other, by talking, arguing, persuading, communicating – and above all, by teaching. Our secret, private, internal thoughts may not matter all that much. Elizabeth I herself – she who cut off the hand of John Stubbs for writing a tract – disavowed any intention of peering into people's minds. But how we influence each other, what we teach – by writing, by journalism, by

talking on the radio, on platforms, in churches and mosques, in classrooms – that does matter. If we are going to influence people, it's important that we get it right.

Which brings us to the subject of this book, which is various (but related) forms of scepticism and relativism about truth and the possibility of knowledge. There are different branches of this phenomenon, and different labels. Postmodernism, epistemic relativism, anti-realism, anti-foundationalism, neopragmatism, feminist epistemology, the strong programme in the sociology of science and knowledge, postcolonialism, and so on. The central idea is the one we've been stalking and creeping up on all this time: scepticism and doubt about the reality, meaning, possibility, importance of truth, and the tendency, which truth-scepticism makes so much easier, to distort and shape truth to favour particular viewpoints.

It's an old idea, this central one, as we will see in Chapter 2, but it has had a renewal of popularity and influence in some branches of the humanities and social sciences in the last three or four decades. Many books and articles have appeared, raising an eyebrow and smiling an incredulous smile at concepts such as rationality, well-conducted enquiry, evidence, inference, warrant, justification, the Enlightenment project, universalism, science and truth. Suspicion of metanarratives, hostility to totalizing projects, condemnation of universalism as a tool of colonialism, identification of knowledge with power, distrust of binary oppositions, resistance to hegemonic discourses, decentering, problematization, interrogation of authority, hierarchies, logocentrism, phallogocentrism – are all part of the arsenal. Some interesting, fruitful and possibly even true ideas have emerged from all this, but there have also been many extremely bad, silly, ill-founded and harmful ones. Those are the ones we want to have a look at.

But does it really matter? Is it worth bothering about? Academic fashions come and go. Dons and professors are always coming up with some New Big Thing, and then getting old and doddering off to the great library in the sky, while new dons and professors hatch new big things, some more and some less silly than others. Casaubon had

his key to all mythologies, Derrida had his, someone will have a new one tomorrow; what of it?

Yes, is our answer; it does matter. It matters for various pragmatic, instrumental reasons. Meera Nanda discusses in *Prophets Facing Backward* the way Hindu fundamentalists in India have drawn on postmodernist scepticism and hostility to science in 'Hinduizing' Indian science, education, textbooks and the like. Richard Evans argues in his book *In Defense of History* that postmodernist scepticism about historical evidence and truth, along with valuable insights, also has dangerous implications.

Nazi Germany seemed to postmodernism's critics to be the point at which an end to hyperrelativism was called for ... There is in fact a massive, carefully empirical literature on the Nazi extermination of the Jews. Clearly, to regard it as fictional, or unreal, or no nearer to historical reality than, say, the work of the 'revisionists' who deny that Auschwitz ever happened at all is simply wrong. Here is an issue where evidence really counts, and can be used to establish the essential facts. Auschwitz was not a discourse. It trivializes mass murder to see it as a text. The gas chambers were not a piece of rhetoric. Auschwitz was indeed inherently a tragedy and cannot be seen as either a comedy or a farce. And if this is true of Auschwitz, then it must be true at least to some degree of other past happenings, events, institutions as well.¹²

That passage is in a book published in 1997. Three years later Evans saw his point enacted in a court of law.

In the David Irving libel trial held two years ago, in which I served as an expert witness for the High Court in London, Irving was suing Penguin Books and their author Deborah Lipstadt for calling him a Holocaust denier and a falsifier of history. It was not difficult to show that Irving had claimed on many occasions that no Jews were killed in gas chambers at the Auschwitz concentration camp. He argued in the courtroom, however, that his claim was supported by the historical evidence. The defence therefore brought forward the world's leading expert on Auschwitz, Robert Jan Van Pelt, to present the evidence that showed that hundreds of thousands of Jews were in fact killed in this way. Van Pelt

examined eyewitness testimony from camp officials and inmates, he looked at photographic evidence of the physical remains of the camp, and he studied contemporary documents such as plans, blueprints, letters, equipment orders, architectural designs, reports and so on. Each of these three kinds of evidence, as the judge concluded, had its flaws and its problems. But all three converged along the same lines, creating an overwhelming probability that Irving was wrong.

Just as important as this was the fact that it was possible to demonstrate that Irving's historical works deliberately falsified the documentary evidence in order to lend plausibility to his preconceived arguments, principally his belief that Hitler was, as he said on one occasion, 'probably the best friend the Jews ever had in the Third Reich'. Falsifying documents involved not just leaving words out from quotes but even putting extra words in to change the meaning. For example, quoting an order from Himmler that a 'Jew-transport from Berlin' to the East should not be annihilated as if it were a general order that no Jews at all, anywhere, were to be killed, by the simple expedients of adding an 'e' to the German word *Transport*, making it plural, and omitting the words 'from Berlin', and hoping that other researchers wouldn't trouble to check the source, or if they did, wouldn't be able to read the handwriting (which is actually very clear and unambiguous). Or by adding the word 'All' to the note of a judge at the Nuremberg Trial in 1946 on the testimony of an Auschwitz survivor which actually said 'this I do not believe', after a small part of her testimony, to make it look as if he did not believe any of it. If we actually believed that documents could say anything we wanted them to, then none of this would actually matter, and it would not be possible to expose historical fraud for what it really is.¹³

There are also reasons beyond the pragmatic and instrumental why truth matters, why it can be seen as an inherent good. They are not conclusive, knock-down, irrefutable reasons, they are not mathematical proofs, but they are reasons. We will discuss some in the final chapter. But for now we will content ourselves with some thoughts about what human beings are, and why, being what they are, they should consider truth a very important value, and considering it such, treat it accordingly.

Looked at in that light, the thought that leaps out at us is this: that

humans are the only entities in the entire universe, for all we know, who have the capacity to make truth their object. The other needs and wishes, the ones that can conflict with truth, the needs and wishes for contentment, happiness, comfort, feelings of security and safety and being protected, are ones that other beings can want and strive for after a fashion. But truth? No. We, by this strange provocative contingent accident of natural selection, have the kind of brain that can conceptualize reality as existing independent of us, and the possibility that we can discover what it is, along with the possibility that we can try to do that and fail, that we can think we've discovered it and be wrong, that we can discover part of it and be at a loss about the rest, and so on.

So one intrinsic reason for thinking we ought to respect the truth, and try to find out what it is, which entails not fudging it whenever we don't like what we find, which entails deciding firmly *in advance* that we will put it first and all other considerations second – one reason for all this is simply that we can, and that as far as we know we are the only ones who can. We can, so we ought to. It would be such a waste not to. If only as a sort of tribute to the remarkable accident of natural selection; to the staggering amazing chain of being: from nothing to something, to life, to intelligence, to truth-seeking.

And then, truth can be seen as a major part of the human heritage. Along with the pyramids and the Great Wall and King's College Chapel, the cumulative gathering up of true knowledge about the world is something that belongs to all human beings across time – particularly of course into the future. It doesn't belong to any of us in particular, to any one generation, to any mere short-lived set of humans, but to all of us. No one brief generation has the right to tamper with it for the sake of its own ephemeral satisfactions. Think of the Bamiyan Buddhas. How disgusting it was, and is, that a band of fundamentalist thugs should dare to destroy something that ought to have belonged to all humans across time as well as across space. The truth is a Bamiyan Buddha. It belongs to everyone, not anyone. No one has a right to destroy or distort or damage it for petty temporary political reasons.